



Lily's Game

Norman Powers

LILY'S GAME

Norman Powers

Copyright © 2013 Norman Powers

ISBN 978-1-62646-832-0

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the author.

Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., Bradenton, Florida.

Printed in the United States of America.

The characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

BookLocker.com, Inc.
2013

First Edition

*Lyrics from "Feel Like I'm Fixin' To Die Rag" used by
kind permission of Concord Music Group.
Words and music by Joe McDonald.
© 1965 (renewed by Alcatraz Music Co., BMI)*

CHAPTER ONE

That ghastly woman with her brood of ragamuffins invaded the ward again this morning. Why they allow my neighbor in the next cell such conjugal visits I can't imagine, even if his murderous history is long past. At least my plunge into such darkness was done less publicly and spectacularly. Efficiently, even.

But like him, my descent was long ago. We have that much in common, I suppose, even if I have never been redeemed by the rosy aura of family and children that he now enjoys. All of us here are far past our misdeeds, and are lightly supervised, conscientiously counseled, watched carefully for signs of regression. But they will not know why that gaggle of children disturbs me so, or more accurately, why one of them does.

She is the oldest of them, perhaps ten years old, the same age as myself when I first met Lily. And her blond hair has the same soft sheen Lily's had, the same pageboy cut. More troubling to me, though, is her serious, unblinking stare, which she fixed on me this morning as her pack of babbling siblings passed by. I confess that in a brief rush of the same madness that made them put locks and bars between me and the docile public, I thought the young urchin *was* Lily. It was only a moment's slip, and I have it firmly under control now, as I have for most of the last twenty-odd years. But for that one moment...

It's impossible she's returned. Isn't it?

In that one moment, I saw not only Lily, but the house we both lived in, set against the bleak winter Berkshires. I always imagine the house in winter, even though it was early spring when I saw it for the first time. The hills were just furred with green, the narrow country

roads were still empty of tourists from New York or Boston that overran the place every summer. We had driven up from Springfield that morning (it was a longer drive in those days, the interstate still not complete) and had met the real estate agent at his office in Northampton.

It's curious how mundane details stick in one's mind. The agent's car was a Cadillac Eldorado, red with white trim. As it purred its way out of town and into the surrounding hills, the smell of its new leather seats mixed with my mother's familiar perfume, the scent wafting back toward me in the cavernous back seat. The two of them were busy chatting when the house floated into view between them through the front windshield, leaving me those precious few seconds when the house and I looked at each other, alone. It was a gray, misty afternoon that softened the house's edges and shrouded its secrets. But I felt like it had been waiting for us, and I knew we would live there.

But my mother had her doubts as soon as her gaze settled on it. "It's bigger than I imagined," she said to the agent. "Bigger than the ad made it sound."

Mr. Harlan - sleek, black hair; the rugged skin of an outdoorsman - waved a big, gnarled hand at the house. "Three bedrooms, two baths," he said. His voice was gruff and coarse, not like the gentle smoothness of my father's. Mr. Harlan glanced at me in the rear view mirror. "Is it just the two of you?"

"My husband was killed in Vietnam last year," my mother said, and paused, waiting for the additional information from me that had become part of our standard response over the last year to such inquiries. We had become used to them by then.

"He was killed in a place called Mei Dong," I dutifully said. "It's one hundred and forty two miles northwest of Saigon. He was killed in a Viet Cong ambush." I suppose it must have sounded like I was reciting a class lesson, but by then my mother's grief over the loss had become such a part of her that it barely registered with me anymore; or, rather, it had added a kind of tragic beauty to her that etched her more deeply in my mind and heart, even if it had hardened into a boundary between us I couldn't cross. That's why I wanted her to like the house, as I did. It would have been something for us to share.

LILY'S GAME

I suppose all sons consider their mothers beautiful, if not physically then in some other, less obvious, way. But my mother was, in fact, strikingly handsome. She was tall, slim, and in those days wore her dark hair long to her shoulders. Some women might have let themselves go at the loss of a husband, but my mother seemed to pay even more careful attention to her appearance after my father was killed. I remember her at the burial ceremony at Springfield's veteran's cemetery, my father's bronze coffin glinting in the sun as she accepted the folded flag that had covered it. Try as they might, none of the men present could take their eyes off her.

By now we had pulled up in front of the house. As my mother reached to open the car door, Mr. Harlan touched her gently on the arm. "I'm so sorry," he said. "It's a lousy war."

"Most wars are," my mother replied simply, before pulling her arm away and getting out of the car. Mr. Harlan turned to me and plastered a bright smile on his face, as if a child wouldn't understand sympathy. "*Well!*" he boomed. "Seth, isn't it?" I nodded. "Why don't we take a look at your new house?"

We stood by the car, the three of us, staring at the house as if waiting for it to speak and explain itself. It sat on a rough stone foundation smeared with green slashes of moss and lichen. Above the foundations rose three clapboard stories topped by what I later knew was a gambrel roof, but which at the time looked to me like a huge, rounded hood that had been draped over the frame below. The roof was pierced by two windowed gables with Gothic trim, that made it seem like the house was raising its eyebrows in surprise at its visitors. The windows on the lower stories - three on each side of a central porch - were without adornment and stared blankly back at us. It had once been painted white, but the paint was faded now, so it was hard to tell where the house ended and the mist began.

Mr. Harlan consulted his notebook. "The lot's about four acres." He turned to me and pointed to a corner of the house. "There's a nice big backyard for you to play in, right around there." I ran ahead of them to see.

The yard's expanse of green seemed immense to me, the ragged lawn jeweled by the mist stretching away from me to a blurred

horizon, where the soft outline of an oak tree floated. Underneath it stood a small figure - a child, I realized, just like me. It raised its hand as if to wave, and I did the same just as my mother and Mr. Harlan came around the corner. I turned to them, my hand still in the air.

“Who on earth are you waving at?” my mother wanted to know, so I turned back to point the figure out to them. But it had disappeared.

“I thought I saw somebody standing over there,” I told them. “Maybe it was one of the neighborhood kids.”

“Then they're pretty far from home,” Mr. Harlan said. “The nearest house is five miles away. But you could have a lot of *your* friends over to play in this yard.” He reached down and tousled my hair. My mother never did that, not since my father was killed. I was about to say that I didn't have many friends, but my mother quickly stepped in.

“Never mind,” she said. “It was just the fog playing tricks.”

I looked back, and it was true that now, even the tree seemed less distinct, less real; and, suddenly, everything seemed that way, as if whatever glue held the world together had loosened up and the tree, the house, the lawn, were all slipping away from each other, big cracks between them growing wider and wider, until I was afraid I'd be swallowed up.

I grabbed onto my mother to keep from falling, and the rough tweed of her coat against my cheek felt safe. Real. I looked again. The lawn, the tree, the house...nothing was wrong. Nothing was falling apart. My mother must have been right, about it being the fog.

“Is he all right?” I heard Mr. Harlan ask.

My mother took my shoulders and pushed me away. “Of course he is,” she answered. “Just an overactive imagination, sometimes.”

“Well, then if you'd like to see the inside of the house...”

We entered through the back door, into a huge kitchen that ran the entire length of the house, dominated by a blackened fireplace set into the far wall. It was large enough for me to stand up in, and was surrounded by an array of hooks and iron arms. There was a huge stove of cracked white porcelain and thick black iron, a pantry with empty wooden shelves.

LILY'S GAME

“The house was built in 1842,” Mr. Harlan read from his sheet. “The fireplace is original and parts of the floor are the original planking.” He looked around the room, as if he’d never seen it before. “You could cook up quite a storm in here, Mrs. Windham.” He flashed my mother a big smile. “Or may I call you Miriam?”

“If you like.” My mother’s voice was flat, without feeling of any kind. Even Mr. Harlan noticed.

“Now, now. You’ll find out that living in a small town like Hadley Falls, everyone gets around to using first names pretty soon.”

“I haven’t decided to take the house yet, though. Have I.”

“Oh, I’m not trying to rush you!” Mr. Harlan protested. “Why don’t we just take a look at the rest of the place?” He smiled again. “I’m Lester, by the way.”

We moved further into the house, a series of empty rooms with wainscoted walls and wooden floors that creaked and snapped under our feet, as if the house was complaining about being woken up after a long sleep. There were window seats in some of the rooms, fireplaces in most of them. There were closets and cupboards; corners where you could hide in dim light; passages between rooms so wide that you could stand in the middle of them, in an in-between space, neither in one room or the other, but in a separate place that belonged to neither. There were plaster moldings in fantastic shapes - curves and swoops of leaves and branches that, if you looked hard enough and imagined hard enough, hid faces and skeletal hands. My mother didn’t seem to notice anything unusual, and as I followed her from room to room, I felt like the house was revealing itself to me...only to me. It trusted me.

But my mother did notice something that I didn’t. When we reached the entry hall at the front of the house, with its staircase hugging one wall and leading up into darkness, she ran her hand along the banister.

“How long has the house been empty?” she wanted to know.

“For about two years,” Mr. Harlan told her. “There was an old couple who lived here last. They died within days of each other.” He shook his head sadly. “Old Harold and Ethel.”

“Funny,” I heard my mother murmur, with her hand still on the banister.

“Yes, it was peculiar, how they both went at the same time.”

“No, not that,” my mother said. “I mean there’s no dust. There’s no dust anywhere in the house.”

Mr. Harlan shuffled his papers, as if the answer was there somewhere. “Well,” he finally said, “the estate might have sent someone to clean it up. It’s been in probate up until a month ago. You’re the first I’ve shown it to.” He gestured toward the stairs. “The bedrooms are all up there. Just watch your step going up, Miriam. The power’s still shut off.” He reached for my mother’s elbow to guide her, but she moved quickly away.

We climbed the stairs, my mother firmly taking my hand when we reached the boundary where the light from downstairs faded into the waiting darkness above; but Mr. Harlan surged ahead into the hallway at the top and threw open a pair of wooden shutters covering a window. The hall ran the length of the house, and the window - one of the three we’d seen from outside - looked out toward the woods and hills opposite. No breeze stirred the trees, nothing moved. Everything was still. Waiting.

When I turned away from the window, Mr. Harlan had already ushered my mother into one of the three bedrooms that opened off the hall. I didn’t like Mr. Harlan, and I didn’t like that he was alone with my mother. I was about to start after them when I heard a creak from down the hall. I looked just in time to see the door at the far end swing open a little, a shaft of golden light spilling through it onto the hallway floor. The splash of light was the color of honey, pure and clean, and I thought that if I stood there, it would feel like the first day of summer, when the sun bathes you in the light you’ve been missing all winter.

Mr. Harlan and my mother came out of the first room and started toward the second, the one in the middle of the hall.

“Are you okay?” my mother asked. I didn’t want them to see the light outside that last room, so I tried to look bored, and nodded at my mother.

“Now, Miriam, in here is the master bedroom,” Mr. Harlan said as he led her into the next room. His voice floated down the hall behind me as I walked to the door at the far end, and stepped into the bright patch on the floor.

LILY'S GAME

I could feel the sun, even through my heavy winter clothes. The warmth made me think of when my father was alive, before he left Springfield for the war, and the times he let me help him in the backyard during the summer; or when, during those soft evenings, we'd sit on the back porch listening to a Red Sox game on the radio. I felt safe, standing there in the light. I peeked through the door and the whole room inside seemed filled with it.

I went in.

I remember to the smallest detail what the room that was to become mine looked like that first time; the floral pattern of the faded wallpaper, in pale greens and blues against what once must have been a pure white background; the arrangement of lighter squares and circles, where pictures and mirrors must once have hung - three cascading squares on the left wall, two in a line on the right, and a large oval on the wall next to a door that I thought must be a closet. I followed the path of the crack in one of the room's two windows, the one on the left - a jagged line running straight down the right side of the glass from the sash, before turning sharply to run across the window, like a backwards "L". There was the floorboard in the far right corner that had come loose, the spider's web over the closet door, and the child's rocking chair in the middle of the room, the only furnishing, still moving slightly, back and forth, as I entered. Lily must have been sitting in it just before I entered, but now she stood silhouetted against the right-hand window.

"Are you going to live here?" Her voice was soft, and a little hoarse, as if she hadn't spoken for a long time.

"I don't know. My mother's deciding."

She stepped away from the window, so the light no longer overshadowed her, and I saw a pale, round face with large blue eyes. Her hair, blond and tousled, was cut short. She wore a checked summer frock, so thin I could see her body underneath it.

"Aren't you cold?" I asked. "It's not even summer yet."

"No. I never get cold." She put out her hand and touched my cheek. "See?"

Her skin was quite warm to my touch, with a faint scent of flowers, and moist earth.

“I hope you come and stay here,” she said. “We could play together. I know lots of games.”

I could hear the murmur of my mother’s voice in the hallway. She and Mr. Harlan had left the middle room and must be heading for us.

“They’d better not catch you in here,” I said. “You could get in trouble.”

“They won’t catch me. No one ever catches me. You’ll see.”

“But they’re going to find you!” I was whispering now, so they wouldn’t hear us.

She smiled - a little, thin smile. “Don’t you want them to see me?”

What would be so awful if they did? Some scolding, perhaps, nothing worse. It wasn’t as if I had done anything wrong. I had just wandered into the room, and there she was.

But...”No,” I said. “I don’t.”

She took my hand. “Then it’ll be our secret, okay?”

I nodded. But they were just outside the room now, and I looked at her helplessly.

“Scaredy-cat!” she whispered. “Scaredy-cat Seth!”

“Am not!”

“Are too!”

Then she giggled, ran to the closet and disappeared inside just as my mother and Mr. Harlan walked into the room. It didn’t occur to me then that I hadn’t told her my name.

My mother followed my eyes toward the closet. “What’s the matter? What’s in there?”

“Nothing,” I said. “I was just looking around.”

“Well, you’re white as a sheet.”

Mr. Harlan walked right over to the closet, swept open the door and poked his head inside for a second or two.

“Nothing,” he said, turning back to us.

My mother pulled her coat more closely around her. “It’s colder in here than the other rooms,” she said. “There must be a draft somewhere.” Her eyes settled on the little rocking chair. “Was there a child?”

“No,” Mr. Harlan said. He gave the rocking chair a little shove with his foot, setting it in motion. “The Millburns lived here alone, for

LILY'S GAME

years. Funny this'd be the only stick of furniture left in the house." He noticed my mother clutching her coat to her body. "We could get that draft fixed in a jiffy," Mr. Harlan assured her. "And no cost to you, either."

"Very generous of you, Mr. Harlan," my mother said in that same flat tone she'd used in the kitchen.

"Please. It's Lester, Miriam."

I glanced back at the closet as we left the room. It stared back, dark and empty.

I would like to write more, about how we came to live in the house. And about Lily. But the warden has just reminded me...well, all of us on the ward....that it's lights out. He does this by standing at the end of the hall and calling "Time, gentlemen!", as if this were a private club - which, in a way, I suppose it is.

I hope setting all this down doesn't invite Lily into my sleep. The drugs usually bring a deep, dreamless night and I trust they will do their work tonight.

I would not like to dream of her.